



POVERTY BAROMETER

January 2007

Ready or Not, Here I Come: Youth "Aging out" of the Child Welfare System

Manitoba's child welfare system is set up to protect children and youth from birth to age 18 from harm to their emotional, physical, and mental well being. Those in need of protection can be removed from their family unit and placed in out of home care such as a foster home, a group home, or a residential facility.

While in care, the provincial government becomes their guardian and is responsible for their wellbeing.* Like a parent, it provides for a child's needs such as a place to live, food to eat, clothing to wear, and ensures there are people in place for support and to make important decisions on their behalf, such as a social worker, foster parent, or other guardian.

When a youth turns 18, in the majority of cases, they are considered an adult and are no longer the responsibility of child welfare system. Unlike a parent who provides ongoing support to their children as they are making the transition to adulthood, in the majority of cases, Child and Family Services—the government body that oversees their care—ends their involvement and closes the file.

"I know 24 year olds whose parents still make them lunch—I don't have that"

When Youth Age Out of Care, 2006

Few youth today are expected to be completely independent when they turn 18. In fact, a growing number put off leaving their family home until they have completed their post-secondary education or until they feel financially and emotionally ready to make the move towards independence.¹

In 2001, 36% of young adults 20-29 years of age in Manitoba lived at home with their parents compared to 24% in 1981.

Youth in care, on the other hand, are expected to be fully independent and self-sufficient at 18 and are pushed into the adult world regardless of whether they are developmentally ready or not. In most cases, this transition does not take into consideration whether the youth still in high school, has a job, has financial resources, is able to make healthy financial decisions, has someone to turn to for help, or can manage a safe home environment.

Unlike other youth who can turn to their family for emotional, social, and/or financial support, many youth "aging out" of the child welfare system lose all ties to their support systems, such as a social worker, friends, or a foster parent.² At a critical time in their lives when they need support and guidance the most, these youth are virtually abandoned by the system that had cared for them.

References: * For further information on the child welfare system, see past Poverty Barometers on this topic at www.spcw.mb.ca or visit the Manitoba Government's website at www.gov.mb.ca. ¹Rutman, Debora, April Barlow, Daniela Alusik, Carol Hubberstey, and Erinn Brown (2003). Supporting Young People's Transitions from Government Care, in Kathleen Kufeldt and Brad McKenzie, eds. *Child Welfare: Connecting Research, Policy, and Practice*. ²Ibid ³Government of Manitoba. Department of Family Services and Housing ⁴ Ibid. ⁵ Ibid. ⁶ Ibid.

Support for Independent Living: Are We Doing Enough?

In 2004/2005, there were 6,118 children and youth in the care of Child and Family Services. Of these, 15.8%, or 969, were between the ages of 16-18 and beginning to prepare for leaving the system.³ Manitoba has some programs and supports in place to help prepare youth for independence, but is it enough?

Before they turn 18, child welfare agencies offer independent living programs that help develop essential skills and supports such as life skills, budgeting, nutrition, meal preparation, legal rights, and resources in the community. In 2005, however, only 11% of eligible youth between 16 and 18 years of age were in independent living programs.⁴

In some cases, care can be extended from 18 to 21 years of age.* Generally care is extended for youth living with disabilities, but can be provided for those still completing high school. Many youth, however, are not aware that they can apply for extended care services and most do not receive it. In 2005, there were only 43 youth between 18 and 20 in the child welfare system. Less than 1% of the youth in care were in extended care.⁵

Financial support may be available through the Age of Majority Allowance before youth turn 18 or for one month after. The funds of up to \$1000 are based on a list of needs prepared with the agency. Funds can be used to help to pay for rent or other needed goods and services, like furniture or groceries.⁶ This financial assistance is only short term and youth do not have a voice in how the funds will be spent.

Studies have found that the most important supports during the transition phase are high quality relationships with a trusted adult and emotional support.⁷ In addition to ongoing relationships, youth need financial support, mentoring and peer support, transition and post transition individualized supports, assistance in gaining access to education, employment, and training programs, and stronger independent living programs to help develop problem solving skills.⁸

The lack of preparation and ongoing supports during and after the transition phase puts these youth at an unfair disadvantage. They start adult life earlier and with fewer supports than their peers. They are often dealing with emotional scars and low self esteem. They can be without a family support system and social networks, have limited or no financial resources, and may still be in high school.⁹

As a result, these youth are put at greater risk of experiencing long term poverty, social isolation, and a range of poor outcomes.¹⁰ Research shows that compared to their peers, youth who have "aged" out of care are more likely to:

- Live in poverty
- Have poor health
- Become a young and lone parent
- Experience homelessness
- Substance abuse
- Unemployment or underemployment
- Rely on income assistance
- Be involved with the criminal justice system
- Leave school before completing post secondary education.¹¹

How Youth Leaving Care Compare with Their Peers Not in Care

A British Columbia study compared youth formerly in care with youth who had not been in care and found worse outcomes on every indicator.

Indicator	Youth Leaving Care	Youth Not in Care
Live with family	14%	92% (age 18) 67% (19-24)
Completed grade 12/ Graduated high school	41%	71%
Receive income assistance	44%	25%
Self rated health as "good" or "excellent"	65%	86%

Source: Selected information from *When Youth Age out of Care: A Report on Baseline Findings*. A report of the *Promoting Positive Outcomes for Youth From Care* project. Available from: <http://socialwork.uvic.ca/docs/research/whenyouthage.pdf>.

References: *Only permanent wards are eligible for extended care. ⁷ Mann-Feder, Varda and Trish White (2003). *The Transition to Independent Living: Preliminary Findings from the Experiences of Youth in Care*, in Kathleen Kufeldt and Brad McKenzie, eds. *Child Welfare: Connecting Research, Policy, and Practice*.

At a Disadvantage: Life after "Aging out"

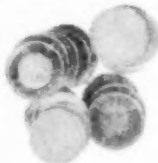
The long term costs of not supporting youth as they age out of the system are far greater than the immediate costs. When we allow youth to leave the child welfare system unprepared for independence and without ongoing support, the indirect costs are felt in other government departments such as health care, education, justice, and social services.

Poverty

When youth age out of care, they lose the income support they received from Child and Family Services. Without this critical financial support, they must find a job that will give them enough hours and enough pay to support themselves. This can be especially challenging if they are still in high school or caring for a young child of their own.

Young workers typically have higher unemployment rates and frequently work in part time, contract, temporary or seasonal jobs with few or no benefits and low pay.¹² In 2004, the majority (66%) of youth aged 18-24 in Manitoba earned less than \$10.25/hour and 13% earned less than \$7.25/hour. In order to reach the poverty line they would have had to earn at least \$10.43/hour.¹³

In Winnipeg, 62.8% of families where the major income earner was under 25 years of age lived in low income in 2004.



Youth who are unemployed or without the means to support themselves must turn to the Employment and Income Assistance program. One study found that as many as 25% of former youth in care received some form of public assistance.¹⁴

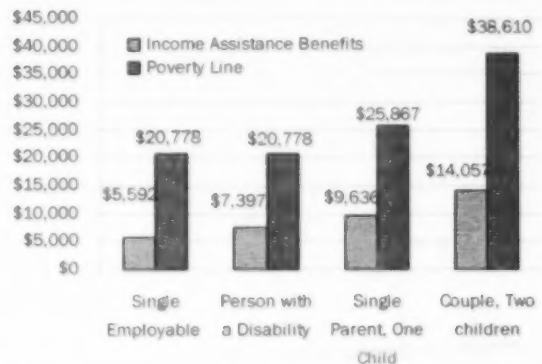
The Employment and Income Assistance program in Manitoba provides such low levels of assistance that many struggle to meet their basic needs. As the graph to the right shows, a single adult receives \$5,592/year. This is equivalent to 27% of the income needed to reach the poverty line.

Housing

Many youth aging out of care face challenges simply finding a place to live. They often lack a rental history, which many landlords require, may not have a co-signer, and often cannot find a decent affordable place. The lack of transitional, supportive, and affordable housing puts these youth at risk of homelessness.

Studies have found many homeless youth and adults have a history of involvement with the child welfare system.¹⁵ A recent count of those using emergency shelters found that the number of youth using Winnipeg shelters has increased. Between 1997 and 2004, the percentage of young adults aged 18 to 34 staying overnight at Main Street Project almost tripled from 12% to 32%.¹⁶

Employment and Income Assistance Rates by Family Type and Poverty Line, Manitoba 2005



Source: Social Planning Council of Winnipeg using National Council of Welfare (2006) *Welfare Incomes 2005* and Statistics Canada 2005 Before Tax Low Income Cut Offs (1992 base).

Criminal Justice

Studies have found a connection between involvement in the criminal justice system and child welfare system, especially among Aboriginal offenders. One study found that 63% of Aboriginal offenders had childhood experience with child welfare system compared to 36% for non-Aboriginal offenders.¹⁷

References: ¹²Tweddle, Anne (2005). *Youth Leaving Care: How do they fare?* Briefing paper prepared for Modernizing Income Security Among Working Age Adults. ¹³Ibid. ¹⁴Rutman, Debora, April Barlow, Daniela Alusik, Carol Hubberstey, and Erinn Brown (2003). *Supporting Young People's Transitions from Government Care*, in Kathleen Kufeldt and Brad McKenzie, eds. *Child Welfare: Connecting Research, Policy, and Practice*. ¹⁵*Youth Leaving Care: How do they fare?* Briefing paper prepared for Modernizing Income Security Among Working Age Adults.

¹⁶Canadian Council on Social Development (2006). *The Progress of Canada's Children and Youth*.

RECOMMENDATIONS

"While some youth might be ready at 18 to become independent, age alone is not the most important determining factor"

Supporting Young People's Transitions from Government Care in Child Welfare: Connecting Research, Policy, and Practice (2003).

Current services and supports for youth exiting care are geared towards meeting short term, immediate needs and rarely extend beyond a youth's 18th birthday. These youth deserve the same ongoing support their peers receive that gives them more options for a better life.

The Manitoba Campaign 2000 Continues Committee agrees with the recent report, *Strengthen the Commitment: An External Review of the Child Welfare System*¹⁸, which recommends:

- The child welfare system provide assistance to children who have been in the care of the child welfare system and who are "aging out" of it, to ensure that the support that they receive focuses on independent living skills, rather than being cut off upon reaching majority.

In addition, the committee also recommends:

- Expansion of independent living programs to all youth between 16 and 18 who require it.
- Raise the maximum age at which youth receive extended care from 21 to 24 years of age.
- Expand current financial grants programs to enable youth to complete high school and access some form of post secondary education.
- Work with other provinces, service providers, and other community stakeholders to develop a system to track the outcomes of youth leaving care over time.
- Support the creation of safe, appropriate and affordable transitional and permanent housing for youth transitioning to independent living.
- Increase income assistance rates to the poverty line and minimum wage to a living level so that these youth are able to support themselves and meet their basic needs.

The Measure of Success: Tools for Successful Transition to Independence

VOICES – Manitoba's Youth in Care Network suggests the following checklist for youth considering their transition out of care:

- Are you still in school?
- Have you secured employment?
- Can you budget and make healthy financial decisions?
- Do you have a network of social supports or someone to turn to?
- Can you cook and maintain a safe home environment?

To the adults and professionals working with young people about to transition to independence:

- Youth need to be provided options and information about educational opportunities beyond high school.
- Youth need to be consulted and have a voice in the switch to independent living...their opinions should be honoured as to what their future plans will be.
- All youth should be given help to live on their own long before it becomes a reality. They should be provided referrals or a listing of where to get help.
- Youth should have opportunities to actively and meaningfully participate in the development of programs and creation of plans designed to assist them in becoming self-sufficient.

References: ¹³Just Income Coalition. *An Analysis of data from Statistics Canada Labour Force Survey*. Unpublished. ¹⁴Social Planning Council of Winnipeg (2002). *Poverty Barometer. No Holiday from Poverty for Children in Care*. ¹⁵Serge, Luba, Margaret Eberle, Michael Goldberg, Susan Sullivan, and Peter Dudding (2002). *Pilot Study: The Child Welfare System and Homelessness among Canadian Youth*. National Homelessness Initiative. ¹⁶*Circumstance Not Choice. 2005 Report on Homelessness and Housing in Winnipeg*. Social Planning Council of Winnipeg. ¹⁷Trevethan, Shelley and John-Patrick Moore. *Childhood Experiences affect Aboriginal offenders*. Correctional Service of Canada. ¹⁸Hardy, Michael, Billie Schibler, and Irene Hamilton (2006). *Strengthen the Commitment: An External Review of the Child Welfare System*.

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